

Rebuilding relations with Lao PDR

By Tom LaVenture

ST. PAUL (May 23, 2005) – A Business Delegation from Vientiane, Laos with a mission of promoting cultural, social and economic opportunities with the United States, visited Minnesota on Monday to begin building a new era of Normalized Trade Relations between the two countries. The Delegation, led by His Excellency Phanthong Phommahaxay, Ambassador of Laos Peoples Democratic Republic (PDR) to the United States, also visited New York and California.

The groundbreaking event was hailed as a successful first step in re-building relations after thirty years of Cold War with the communist nation.

A day of workshops and meetings was followed by an evening banquet at Drover's Hotel in South St. Paul. The banquet included a traditional Lao Baci (special reception) ceremony in honor of the delegation.

The event was sponsored by the Minnesota Trade Office, in conjunction with the U.S. Department of Commerce, U.S. Export Assistance Center, Fund for Reconciliation and Development, and Laotian Multi-Ethnic Alliance for USA-Laos Friendship.

The Laotian Multi-Ethnic Alliance for USA-Laos Friendship, is chaired by Dr. Yang Dao, and advocates for U.S. policy toward Laos that improves trade, social, economic, cultural and educational opportunities through work with the U.S. Department of State and various nongovernmental organizations.

Mr. Langsanh Souvannasoth, co chair, Laotian Multi-Ethnic Alliance for USA-Laos Friendship of Minnesota, event co-sponsor, welcomed the Laotian delegation on their "historic tour of our state."

Souvannasoth said the winds of change have been in motion ever since President George W. Bush signed the Laos NTR bill to law on December 3, 2004. He expressed joy that the "bumpy road that has been complicated by violence" has been opened to a new horizon for businessmen and entrepreneurs. The Laotian government ratified the NTR agreement on December 26, 2004.

"This is a new chapter of political and economic relations between the United States and the Lao PDR," he said.

Congresswoman Betty McCollum (MN-04), who led the national effort to pass Laos NTR, addressed the conference, thanking supporters for the support a year ago, and for taking the cause of bilateral relations to the next level.

"I am committed to working with all of you here today, along with U.S. Ambassador to Laos Patricia Haslach, to strengthen the relationships between the United States and Lao PDR," said McCollum.

Participants explored prospective Laotian and American markets, and presented a wealth of information and resources. Representatives from the Minnesota Trade Office discussed Minnesota imports and exports, along with cultural, educational and tourism opportunities with Laos.

Tony Lorusso, director, Minnesota Trade Office, expressed to guests at the dinner his pleasure with progress made during the workshop earlier in the day.

"Today was an opportunity to work with local Laotian and Hmong community," said Lorusso. "This was the most ambitious relationship building we have done between Minnesota and Laos."

Lorusso, pleased that the Laos PDR government chose Minnesota to begin their relationship building effort, said the meetings with 3M executives, Senator Mee Moua and other American Hmong and Laotian community leaders, "enhanced the fabric of diversity both culturally and politically."

Lee Pao Xiong, Concordia College, said this was an important dialogue that was necessary to establish trust and move forward. The first meetings may not produce breakthrough agreements, but will set the tone for the future.

"A lot came from the meeting today," he said. "It was a good conversation."

He wanted the Laotian delegation to see that Hmong Americans today is not the same community as in 1975. Similarly, he wants Hmong Americans to see that Laos in 2005 is not the same country it was in 1975.

"I hope that the Lao delegation will see this community in America with assets and not as people who want to come there and sabotage the government," said Lee Pao Xiong.

NTR supporters are eager to engage with Laos through trade, business transactions and family reunification in the years to come. By granting NTR status to Laos, it means the tariffs imposed on products, goods and services imported from Laos into the United States will be reduced from 45% to about 3%. NTR is a significant step that will help alleviate poverty and improve the quality of life in Laos. In the end, NTR will also help the Lao government to move towards reforms and transparency on human rights and religious freedoms.

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